

# *In God's garden*

## What fig trees teach us about Advent.

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### WEEK 1: IMPOSSIBLE POSSIBILITIES

📖 **Read:** Matthew 21:18-22; Mark 11:12-25

Happy New Year! The new church year begins with this season of Advent. It's quite a season for the beginning of our journey. During Advent, we wait and watch together, keeping our eyes, ears, hearts and minds open for God's presence and activity in the world. Together, we anticipate and get ready for the coming of our Lord Jesus, the one we call Emmanuel or "God with us." Advent is a season of planting and sowing; a time of expectation and excitement. During Advent, we wait and prepare for God's promises to be fulfilled in our midst.

As we journey through this devotional study, we will be led by a surprising group of teachers: fig trees. These trees and the fruit they bear have a great deal to teach us about what it means to watch, wait and prepare.

Figs are thought to be among the world's first cultivated fruits, thanks to fig trees' elaborate root systems and low-maintenance care. Native to the Mediterranean and the Middle East, fig trees thrive in warm and dry climates. They grow sturdy, rapid-spreading roots that can stretch out more than 50 feet, in search of water and nutrients to help them flourish and bear fruit. Fig trees are vivacious and spirited, with resilient roots. They can make a home alongside anything and everything, spreading like ivy across houses and fences, wrapping around rivers and ponds, even bursting through pipes.

This is what makes our first fig tree story in this season of Advent both remarkable and surprising. As the gospels of Matthew and Mark tell us, after his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, Jesus encounters one of these resilient, sturdy fig trees along a road, and curses it. "May no fruit ever come from you again!" Jesus says (Matthew 21:19). If you're thinking this is odd, I guarantee you're not alone. We don't often think of Jesus as one who curses, do we? Perhaps the strangest part is that Jesus proclaims this grim fate for a healthy, thriving member of the fig tree family—a tree more resilient than almost any other. Then we're told that the fig tree not only remains fruitless, but withers away and dies altogether—either on the spot (according to Matthew) or in one short day (according to Mark).

And the lesson in all this? Jesus tells his disciples: "Have faith in God. Truly I tell you, if you say to this mountain, 'Be taken up and thrown into the sea,' and if you do not doubt in your heart but believe that what you say will come to pass, it will be done for you" (Mark 11:22-23). Faith makes the impossible possible, Jesus says. Faith can move mountains, tame seas or wither even the liveliest fig tree. I'm reminded of Yoda's words in the movie, *Star Wars*, as he instructs young Luke Skywalker to lift an impossibly heavy, waterlogged starfighter: "Do or do not. There is no try."

We tend to think of faith as a "head" word, don't we? We tell ourselves that faith is a matter of doctrine and theology, and of believing the right things. Jesus uses the fig tree to teach us that faith is a "hands and feet" word. Our faith is fully realized when we put that faith into action in our broken, beautiful world. Even when the world seems broken beyond repair, even when we feel broken beyond repair, even when wholeness, justice and peace feel impossible, we wait for the fulfillment of God's promise to make all things new, knowing that God is present and active among us, calling us to love and serve our neighbors with our lives.

**Share aloud or reflect:**

1. What differences do you notice between Matthew and Mark in the telling of this story? What new possibilities and thoughts do these differences bring to mind?
2. This Advent, what are some ways that you can make faith a “hands and feet” word?

**WEEK 2: BEARING FRUIT**

📖 **Read:** Luke 13:1-9

When I was growing up, one of my favorite CDs was Simon and Garfunkel’s Greatest Hits. It included, “I Am a Rock,” where Paul Simon sings:

*I won’t disturb the slumber of feelings  
that have died*

*If I never loved, I never would have cried*

*I am a rock. I am an island*

*...And a rock feels no pain*

*And an island never cries.*

As a kid, I didn’t really understand these words. But if I’m being honest, being a rock and an island doesn’t sound all that bad, right about now. On difficult days, there’s just so much (too much!) to care about. When faced with so much suffering, it seems easier to uproot ourselves and choose apathy. We may trick ourselves into believing that it’s better to become rocks that feel no pain or islands that never cry. Psychologists call this “compassion fatigue.”

And that’s where Jesus meets us this week—in our compassion fatigue and

our rootlessness. Jesus speaks to a crowd about two recent disasters in his community: a massacre in a nearby town and the fall of the Tower of Siloam. He tells those gathered that these tragedies don’t have a meaning or a purpose. He says that tragedies like these are simply part of what it means to be human in this broken, beautiful world. In the words of our Buddhist neighbors, “life is suffering” and we cannot escape that reality, no matter how hard we try.

But then, seeming to turn 180 degrees, Jesus tells us this strange little parable





about a fig tree that just won't bear fruit. It's on the brink of being cut down...until the gardener steps in, saying: "Let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down."

When a fig tree starts growing, it's nearly impossible to stop it. But sometimes even the most vibrant fig trees stop bearing fruit. Almost always, the problem comes down to the root system. Either the roots aren't wide or deep enough, or they may have been broken or spread too thin, preventing the fig tree from flourishing. A fig tree can't bear fruit if it doesn't have solid roots.

And like the fig tree of Jesus' parable, we can't bear fruit if we don't have solid roots. When we isolate ourselves and turn away from the suffering of the world, we're like that fruitless fig tree. Yet try as we might, we're not rocks or islands. We belong to each other and to all the other trees in God's garden. That's the way in which we bear fruit. In Jesus' parable, God's judgment looms large at our failures: "Cut this tree down! Why should it be wasting the soil?"

Thanks be to God, God's grace is there too—always in conversation with God's judgment. Judgment isn't the end. We're never told the fate of that fig tree. Jesus leaves the ending of the parable as a mystery...a call...an invitation. Even a fig tree on the brink of death can be brought back to a flourishing, fruit-bearing life, with just a little tender care. God—our vineyard owner and our gardener—doesn't give up on us. God tends us, cares for us, and leads us back to our true home, back to who we are

and whose we are, back to God, back to one another. We're not rocks or islands. We're fig trees. We belong to the garden and to each other.

**Share aloud or reflect:**

3. Have you experienced compassion fatigue in the past? Are you experiencing it now? If so, how does it make you feel?
4. How can you and other members of your congregation and/or Bible study group nurture and tend one another's roots? What support do you need? What support can you offer?

**WEEK 3: "I SAW YOU"**

 **Read:** John 1:43-51

As we journey through our third week of Advent, we find ourselves sitting with Nathanael in the shade of a fig tree, waiting and watching for God. Like Nathanael, we might be a little skeptical when God arrives in unexpected places, in unexpected ways, through unexpected people. "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" we ask. "Can anything good come out of that place? Can anything good come from those people?"

Sure enough, God is present and active.

Alongside Nathanael, we learn not only how surprising God's work in the world is—but that all along God has been at work in our midst. "I saw you," Jesus says to Nathanael and us. "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you."

The fig tree may seem like an unimportant detail. It is not. The fig tree is at the center of this story. Together, we've learned some of the physical attributes of fig trees and what makes them so remarkable: their vibrant growth, resilience and zest for life, even in the most precarious situations. But did you know that fig trees are also an important

symbol in the Bible for God's relationship with God's people?

For example, after eating the forbidden fruit, Adam and Eve sewed fig leaves together in their shame to make clothes for themselves (Genesis 3:7). After the Israelites escape from Egypt, during their long journey through the wilderness, they complain that there are no figs for them to enjoy. Amid their wandering, it feels like God's sustaining love is far from them (Numbers 20:5). But Moses reminds them of God's holy promise to lead them to the land of milk and honey—"a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates" (Deuteronomy 8:8, emphasis mine). During the reign of the good King Solomon, we are told that this promise was fulfilled, and that God's people lived "under their vines and fig trees" (1 Kings 4:25). Later on, when God's relationship with God's people is strained nearly to the point of breaking, the people of God in exile are described as a withering fig tree (Jeremiah 8:13). But as the prophets Joel and Micah proclaim, God is faithful. God will heal God's people and nurture that withering fig tree back to flourishing life (Joel 2:22, Micah 4:4).

Let these stories and images surround you, as you encounter Nathanael's story. Nathanael isn't sitting under just any tree. He is sitting under a fig tree. That is no accident. This biblical imagery reminds us that Nathanael (like all of our human family) is part of God's holy garden, and someone God created and planted. God has known Nathanael and us from seed and sapling. God will continue to lovingly tend us forever, in withering times when the harvest is fruitless, and in joyful times when life flourishes.

We give thanks for God our gardener and for our lives as fig trees in God's holy garden. Just as God knows and calls Nathanael, God knows and calls us to life in abundance. Sometimes surprising, but more expansive than we can possibly imagine, God's garden is a place where we are seen and



known, from the very beginning. God will continue to journey with us and tend us throughout our lives.

**Share aloud or reflect:**

7. Have you been surprised, like Nathanael, by God’s work in the world? How so?
8. How do we sit under fig trees, too, in our time? How does sitting under the fig trees help us not to miss seeing the holy reminders of God’s work in the world?

**WEEK 4: LEARN ITS LESSON**

■ **Read:** Mark 13:24–37; Luke 21:25–36

“Be alert at all times” (Luke 21:36).

“And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake” (Mark 13:37).

As the birth of our Lord Jesus draws closer with each new day, Jesus’s message is clear: Keep awake. Remain alert. Be ready for anything. As any good Scout would say, “Be prepared.”

Nowhere, Jesus tells us, will we learn this lesson better than from—you guessed it!—fig trees! Fig trees are resilient, powerful, lively symbols of God’s relationship with God’s people. In the past week, we’ve learned a lot from fig trees. We’ve learned that we are called to believe in impossible possibilities. We are to trust in God, not just in our hearts and minds, but with our whole selves and our whole lives. We’ve learned that we are planted in God’s holy garden, and that we belong to our gardener and to one another. We’ve also seen that God’s garden is bigger and more inclusive than we could possibly imagine. We have heard that God, our gardener, will never abandon us.

Today, we learn one more critical lesson: We are called, not simply to exist, but to flourish and to bear fruit. Jesus explains: “From the fig tree learn its lesson: As soon as its branch becomes tender and

puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that [God] is near, at the very gates” (Mark 13:28-29). Jesus tells us that this is what it means to keep awake, remain alert and be prepared: We are to bear fruit.

In these final days of Advent, we wait, watch and prepare for Jesus’ coming. This is not a passive vocation, but an active and proactive one. As we wait, we are to bear the fruit of love and justice and peace and joy in our broken, beautiful world. When we do this, we discover that God has been working all around us and is even nearer to us than we thought was possible. Jesus says God is “at the very gates.”

As fig trees in God’s holy garden, we wait for Jesus’s coming at Christmas, but we also wait for Jesus’s return to our broken, beautiful world, to set all things right and make all things new. This week, Jesus uses lots of apocalyptic imagery to describe his eventual return—darkening suns and moons, falling stars, the heavens themselves shaking, the triumphal return of the Son of Man in clouds, and angels sent on holy missions to the ends of the earth. It’s overwhelming, and even a little scary. Yet in the face of it all, Jesus tells us to learn from the fig trees in our midst—to keep bearing fruit, remain vigilant and prepare for his coming.

#### CLOSING ACTIVITIES

O God, our gardener, as we prepare to celebrate Christmas, may we rejoice in the ways you have already come among us! May we continue to keep awake and bear fruit as we anticipate Jesus’s return to our broken, beautiful world, when all things will be made new. May we learn from the fig trees in our midst, this Advent and always. Amen. 🌿

